

# The Cotehele Cupboard Revisited: One Cupboard or Two?

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In the 2012 edition of this Journal, Nicholas Riall published a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the ‘Cotehele’ cupboard front which examined both its structure and its iconography in considerable depth (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> His analysis owed much to the opportunities offered by a programme of conservation undertaken by the Tankerdale workshop in Petersfield, Hampshire, during which the object was partially disassembled and a selective dendrochronological survey carried out. As a result, Riall was able to show that the tradition that the cupboard was brought to Cotehele by Catherine, widow of Sir Griffith ap Rhys, in 1524/5 was unlikely to be true — at least two of the ring-dated timbers in the cupboard were from trees felled after 1524. He further showed that heraldic devices on the cupboard frame implied a link to some important families in the Welsh Marches, namely the Fitzalans, lords of Clun and Oswestry, and the Talbots, earls of Shrewsbury. This interpretation contradicted the account of the cupboard published by Richard Bebb in 2007, in which it was argued that the most likely original owners were the descendants of Harri ap Gruffudd of Newcourt in the Golden Valley, Herefordshire.<sup>2</sup> Riall’s most surprising finding, however, was that the cupboard is not a single object but a composite of two structures (or three if you include the drawer fronts, which are known not to be original). He suggested that the frame (which he named Cotehele 1), originally contained different panels which at a later date were removed and the present panels (Cotehele 2), were fitted. The result is the confection we know today as the Cotehele cupboard (Cotehele 3). This too contradicted Bebb’s account, which assumed that the cupboard was a single work.

This short article asks whether Riall’s hypothesis is correct? Is the cupboard in its present form a combination of more than one object? It is a question worth asking because, although the Cotehele cupboard is by any standards a remarkable thing, its importance both as an historic object and as work of art relies on it being essentially whole and unaltered. Moreover, it bears directly on the questions of when, where and for whom the cupboard was created.

It should be stressed that no-one has yet questioned the authenticity of the carving, nor have they disputed that the frame and the panels were carved by the same hand. The dendrochronological evidence suggests that both elements were made from oak grown in approximately the same location and felled at approximately the same time. Riall’s hypothesis rests wholly on the physical evidence revealed when the cupboard’s panels were removed for conservation. It can be summarised as follows (see Figure 2). The two ‘drawer’ fronts (nos 4 and 5), filling the apertures where drawers were once fitted, are undoubtedly not original and this is not disputed. More controversial are saw marks on some parts of the frame which show that at some time the corner panels

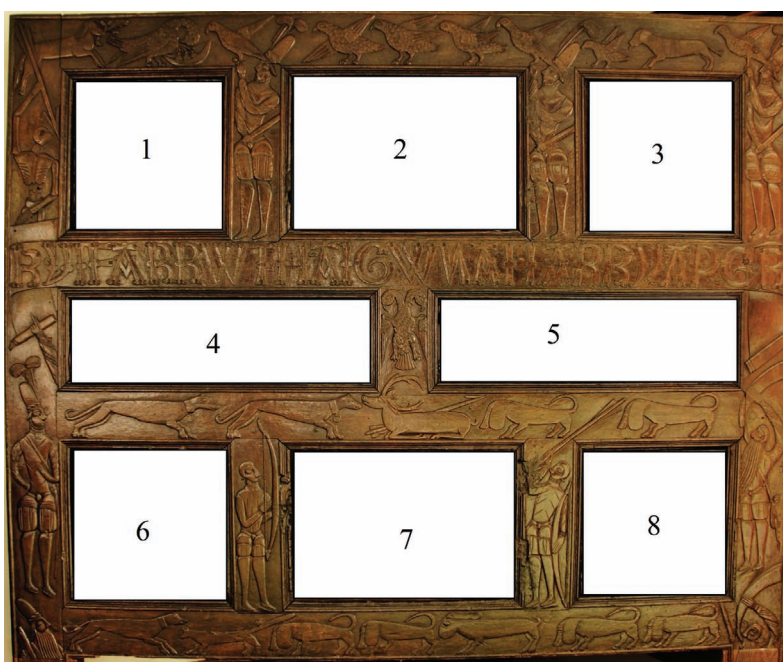
<sup>1</sup> Riall (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Bebb (2007), I, pp. 161–68.

1 The Cotehele cupboard front.  
*Tankerdale Conservation / The National Trust*



2 The Cotehele cupboard, the panels numbered as in Riall (2012) and in the present article. *The author*



(nos 1, 3, 6 and 8) were removed; at the same time, saw marks on the edges of the corresponding panels show that they have been trimmed on three sides to remove them from their frame (Figure 3). Therefore, Riall suggested, the original panels must have been sawn out and removed, and the present panels, having been sawn out from a different setting, were introduced into the frame. At the same time, because the introduced panels were thinner than those originally fitted to the cupboard, backing boards were added to remedy the slack fit in the frame.

The upper and lower central panels (nos 2 and 7) are different. Whereas the other four have backing boards, these do not. The apertures which they occupy were always intended to receive doors but, Riall argued, these panels are not the original doors. He proposed that, like the other panels, they were cut from their original setting and adapted to fit the apertures in the frame. Neither occupies the full width of the aperture, and each has a hanging stile added to its right hand edge, but there is no trace on either stile of the iron hinges whose marks can be seen on the corresponding part of the frame. Clearly, these stiles cannot be original to the frame, and the panels themselves are not wide enough to fill the frame without them.

Taken at face value, the evidence is damning, but the sheer oddity of having two perfectly good pieces of woodwork butchered and reassembled, even though apparently made at the same time and carved by the same hand, makes it worth re-examining. Further, every panel apart from the two doors (nos 2 and 7, of which more later), is an exact fit, in height and width, in the frame. If this is coincidence, it is a remarkable one. Is there perhaps another explanation for the apparent anomalies?

There is no doubt that panels 1, 3, 6 and 8 have been removed from their frames at some time, because the sawn edges are plain to see (Figure 3), and without their edges



3 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the sawn edge of the carved panel (no. 3), partially removed from its frame. *The author*





4 The back of the Cotehele cupboard front, showing the battens of various dates which hold the panels and backing boards in place. *Tankerdale Conservation / The National Trust*

to locate them in the frame grooves, they seemingly rely on the backing boards and a collection of odd battens to hold them in place (Figure 4). But in fact the backing boards have themselves been cut, and are also lacking edges to locate them in the grooves (Figure 5). So the backing boards do nothing whatever to secure the panels by taking up the slack in the frame grooves. This raises the possibility that the backing boards and the panels belong together and were cut from their frame at the same time.

Layered panelling, comprising carved and pierced decoration superimposed on a plain backboard, is common in medieval churches, for instance in the lower portions of rood screens (Figure 6). The construction has several advantages: it offers depth with the minimum of labour and waste; it allows the carver greater freedom in modelling and undercutting; it allows the rebates for the panelling to be cut to the same width as the mortises for the muntins and rails, thus saving labour in manufacture. For any woodworker whose primary livelihood was in ecclesiastical work making layered panels was routine, so their use in the Cotehele cupboard is unremarkable. The backing boards are also the reason why the pierced panels have survived so well, because such delicate carving would otherwise probably not have survived without significant damage.

That the carved panels and the backing boards belong together is confirmed by the dendrochronology, which shows that at least one panel and one backing board were



5 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing saw cuts on (from back to front) backing board (a), frame (b) and carved panel (c). The light coloured wood between the backing board and the frame is a modern filler to stop the panel and backing board dropping into the frame groove. *Tankerdale Conservation / The National Trust*



6 Panels from a rood screen, West Country, c. 1520. *V&A Museum*, W.54-1928

made from wood of the same tree.<sup>3</sup> But were they original to the Cotehele frame, or taken from another source? The fact that they fit so well is a strong argument in favour of originality, but if that is the case, why were they cut out and then reinstated?

Because there is very little evidence of scarring on the front edges of the panel apertures, it seems likely that the panels were cut out from behind; if cut from the front, one would expect to see more damage. Moreover, the panels have clearly been cut with a saw, but how was the saw blade introduced? The most likely explanation is that it was done from the rear, where it was possible to work the saw in without damage to the front. This implies that the cupboard was already reduced to its present form,

<sup>3</sup> Riall (2012), Appendix I.



- 7 Cotehele cupboard,  
detail, showing traces  
of paint and/or  
gilding. *The author*



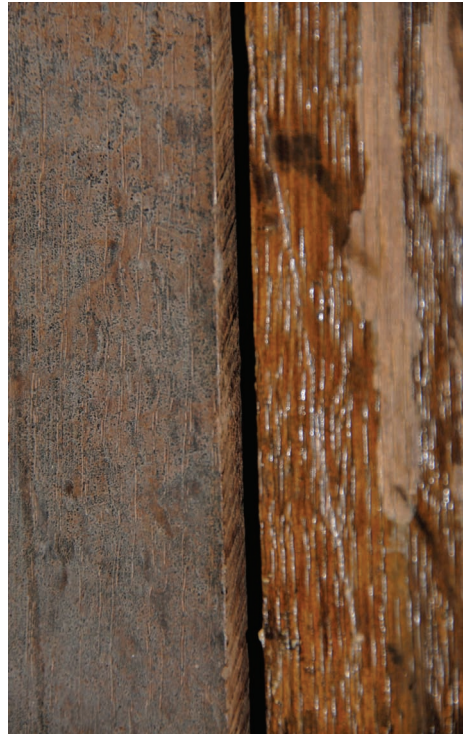
- 8 Cotehele cupboard,  
detail, showing the  
different finishes of  
the carving and  
backboard of panel 8.  
They have been  
cleaned and  
refinished separately.  
*The author*



because it would otherwise be impossible to get at the back of the panels. Indeed, it is even now difficult to remove the panels from the front, and they must be taken from the back after first removing the later battens. The removal of the panels is therefore likely to have been part of the process of alteration and installation at Cothele, and it is obvious from the way the frame has been roughly thinned down behind that it was probably intended to fit against a wall. Indeed, that is how it appears in the earliest known photograph of the piece at Cotehele (Figure 11).

We will probably never know why the panels had to be removed, but one plausible explanation is that they were originally painted, and because of the layered construction the paint could not be properly removed without dismantling. Traces of paint can be found all over the cupboard (Figure 7), so it has undoubtedly been stripped and given the dark 'antique' finish which it now has. However, there is a marked difference in colour and surface between some backboards and the carving, which shows that the backboards were cleaned and re-finished separately (Figure 8). Unfortunately, no surface analysis was done during conservation (due to lack of funding), so the nature and the sequence of surface finishes is unknown. Another possible explanation is that at one time the panels were displayed separately from the cupboard and the frame put aside. At a later date the two elements were reassembled for display at Cotehele or elsewhere.

The question of the doors (panels 2 and 7) remains to be answered. That their apertures were always intended for doors is not in doubt. The frame is not grooved for fixed panelling, and the lower rails show a prodigious degree of wear consistent with long use. But the present panels are not wide enough for their openings, requiring the present stiles to be added. These stiles have never functioned as hinged or hanging stiles, and their introduction probably dates from the time that the cupboard was reassembled. But, contrary to Riall's assertion that the panels were originally fixed, and must have come from elsewhere, it is evident that they were always intended to be doors. They are not pierced with backing boards but made in one piece, quarter-sawn for stability. Three edges on each panel — top, bottom and left — are unaltered, except by wear. The marks of the joiner's plane are still visible, and they have not been cut out from a frame. The fourth edge (the right or hinge side) has been sawn, so it is obvious that the panels were originally wider (Figure 9). It is also obvious, from the large diameter of the sockets for the original pintle hinges, that these were of wood, not



9 Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the sawn right-hand edge of the door. The shiny surface to the right is the back of the added muntin. *The author*





10 Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the large diameter socket for a wooden pintle hinge.  
*The author*

metal (Figure 10). It is likely that the pins were integral with the door itself, and for this reason the grain of the panel runs vertically rather than horizontally, despite the fact that it is wider than it is high. This is probably also the reason that the panel is not centred in the aperture, because with a pintle hinge the rotating edge of the door has to be relieved so that it does not foul the adjacent frame. Consequently, the carving was inset from the hinged edge to allow for this. In any case, this type of off-centre design is not unusual; the Gwydir cupboard, which is roughly contemporary, has the carving of its two upper doors offset to accommodate knobs and the carved initials of the owner.<sup>4</sup> At some point in the cupboard's history the pintle hinges must have failed (probably by splitting away from the door, a common problem) and metal hinges were introduced. There might, indeed, have been several phases of metal hinges, at least one of which was the familiar 'fishtail' hinge whose scars can be seen on the frame. There were also several phases of catches and locks, whose scars can be seen on both the frame and the panels. Indeed the damage caused by these repeated fixings is obvious from the repairs to both doors.

When the cupboard was reduced to its present form the doors no longer needed to function, so their right hand edges, probably damaged and scarred by repeated

<sup>4</sup> Bebb (2007), I, fig. 324.





11 The cupboard shown *in situ* (right, behind the display of plate) in the Breakfast Room at Cotehele, c. 1873. *The National Trust*

alterations, were cut off and clean replacement stiles added. The stiles were originally muntins, taken from another source and presumably used for their 'antique' character.

If the foregoing reasoning is correct, then a plausible history of the Cotehele cupboard front might run as follows. It was made somewhere in the Welsh Marches about 1525–50. At some later date it was removed to Cotehele, possibly before 1777, when Horace Walpole wrote: 'I never did see Cotchel, and am sorry. Is not the old wardrobe there still? There was one from the time of Cain, but Adams breeches and Eve's under-petticoat were eaten by a goat in the ark'. If Walpole's letter does refer to the present cupboard, it was at that time still in one piece, otherwise it would not have been described as a 'wardrobe'. The cupboard was certainly at Cotehele by c. 1873, which is when the buffet shown next to it in figure 11 was acquired.<sup>5</sup> By that time it had arrived at its present form, lacking sides, back and feet, and with the frame thinned down so that it could be installed against the wall. As part of this installation, or perhaps at an earlier date, the cupboard was stripped, cleaned and given an 'antique' finish, and to facilitate this process the panels and their backboards were cut out. Necessary repairs were effected, particularly to the doors, and the whole edifice was integrated into the fabric of the breakfast room at Cotehele.

<sup>5</sup> A note to this effect written by Caroline Edgecumbe is on file at Cotehele.

Of course, this ‘history’ is only one of many possible scenarios, and the real truth about the changes made to the cupboard over nearly five centuries might never be known, but what should not be in doubt is that the physical evidence of the cupboard shows that it is a single entity and not an assembly of parts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following for their help in preparing and writing this article: Nick Humphrey, Rachel Hunt, Hugh Routh, John Hartley and all at Tankerdale Conservation.

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